

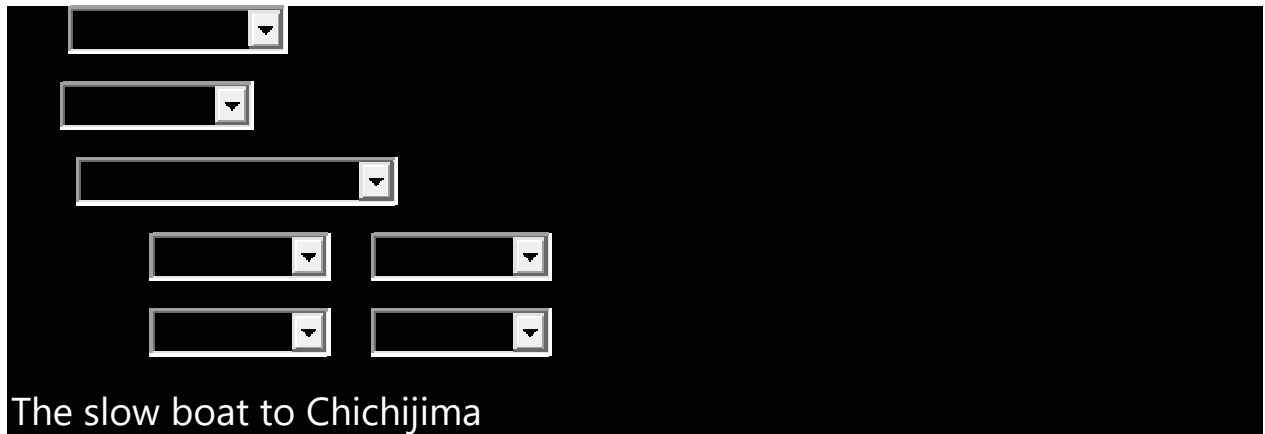
[Asia](#)

On remote Japanese isle, old bonds with America stir modern questions over race and identity

By

[Simon Denyer](#)

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The slow boat to Chichijima

It takes 24 hours by boat from Tokyo to Chichijima, the largest of the Ogasawara islands, 600 miles south of Japan's capital city. (Simon Denyer/The Washington Post)

CHICHIJIMA, Japan — Six hundred miles from Tokyo, on a Pacific island that takes 24 hours to reach by ship, live the remnants of a unique culture descended from American, European and Polynesian settlers who sought a new life almost 200 years ago.

On the quiet streets of Chichijima walk Japanese people with foreign-looking faces, and names like Savory, Washington and Gonzalez. A few still speak a disappearing island dialect that mixes Japanese, English and the occasional Hawaiian word.

It has been buffeted by winds of colonialism, nationalism and warfare, but survives as a melting pot of ethnicities, cultures and languages — a legacy that carries added resonance today in a world facing reckonings over identity and race.

For Japan, a largely mono-ethnic nation, this unique community offers a different definition of what it means to be Japanese. It is also an unusual but potentially inspiring vision of a multiethnic Japan as the country grapples with the need to bring in more foreigners to supplement its labor force and aging society.

“We’re a small island, but we have a lot of history, and we have to preserve that history,” said 60-year-old Rocky Savory, a fifth-generation resident, inside the supermarket he now runs on Chichijima.



RUSSIA

CHINA

N. KOREA

S. KOREA

*Sea of Japan
(East Sea)*

JAPAN

Tokyo

Izu Is.

*Pacific
Ocean*

Okinawa Is.

Chichijima —○
(JAPAN)

400 MILES

In June 1830, 23 men and women made a perilous, 3,300-mile journey from Honolulu on a British schooner named the Washington to settle a lonely archipelago known in the West as the Bonin Islands, a mistranscription of a Japanese word meaning “uninhabited.”

The settlers were lured by accounts of lush lands and turtles so plentiful they paved the shore. The aim was to establish a supply stop for Western whaling ships in what is now called the Ogasawara archipelago.

Today, their descendants make up around 200 of Chichijima’s 2,000 residents, while others are scattered from Guam to Hawaii and the mainland United States.

The volcanic islands had first been mapped by Japanese sailors — although not by the mythical samurai Ogasawara after whom they are now named. They were claimed in 1827 by British naval officer Frederick Beechey, who nailed a copper plaque to a tree. Britons had also led that first group of settlers, but the man who emerged as the community’s eventual leader was an American: Nathaniel Savory, a former whaler from Bradford, Mass., whose career had been cut short after he lost a finger. It is his name that now echoes through the ages, and his legacy that the community still celebrates.



The headstone over the grave of Nathaniel Savory is seen a cemetery in Chichijima, an island in Japan's Ogasawara archipelago, on July 18. Savory, a former whaler from Bradford, Mass., was among the first successful group of settlers to arrive on the islands in June 1830. (Simon Denyer/The Washington Post)

It was Nathaniel Savory who greeted U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry when he visited the islands in 1853, on his way to open Japan to the outside world. Indeed, Perry was so convinced of the islands' potential as a way station between Japan and the United States that he bought a prime plot of land from Savory for \$50.

AD

But Western interest in the islands also ignited Japan's, which sent its own settlers in 1862 and again in 1875, annexing the territory the following year. The original settlers were forced to become naturalized Japanese citizens — although they were never fully accepted by the Japanese state.

To this day, they are referred to in Japanese as “Obeikei,” or Westerners, and their central role in the island's history is given only a cursory mention in the Ogasawara Visitors Center.

The quiet streets of Chichijima

Chichijima, the main island in Japan's Ogasawara chain 600 miles south of Tokyo, has just 2,000 residents. (Simon Denyer/The Washington Post)

The Japanese, Western and Polynesian settlers lived together peacefully and even intermarried until World War II.

Iwo Jima, also a member of the Ogasawara chain, became a fiercely contested prize in the Pacific war. But Chichijima was also massively fortified and extensively bombed, and its civilian population was evacuated to the Japanese mainland.

AD

The descendants of the Western settlers mostly ended up working in munitions factories near Tokyo but, with their foreign looks, suffered widespread discrimination, abuse and even violence in wartime Japan.

Back on Chichijima, the fate of any American airmen who were shot down was even worse, with eight beaten, tortured and executed, and five partially cannibalized on the orders of a Japanese officer, according to records of the United States Navy War Crimes Trials.



A small monument to the crew of a P-51D Mustang that crashed in 1945 on Chichijima, is seen in the forest on July 15. The United States Army Air Forces bombed Chichijima extensively during World War Two and eight pilots were shot down, taken prisoner and executed by the Japanese military. (Simon Denyer/The Washington Post)

George H.W. Bush [narrowly escaped the same fate](#). Just 20 years old, he was shot down during a bombing raid on Chichijima in September 1944, but was picked up by an American submarine, even as Japanese patrol boats pursued his escape raft. Both of his fellow crew members died, and Bush visited the island to retrace his mission and honor their memory in 2002.

AD

Japan's surrender in 1945 brought the Ogasawara islands under the control of the U.S. Navy, which was eyeing a permanent U.S. base on a strategically important location in the escalating Cold War. The Pentagon reluctantly allowed 129 "Western" descendants back to the islands, but denied ethnic Japanese islanders the right to return. Symbolizing the widening divide, three Western islanders testified in war crimes trials against Japanese army officers, and many wanted the Americans to stay. "The Navy took care of us really well," remembers John Washington, 71, who was born just after the war and educated in English on Chichijima before being sent to high school in Guam.

The Navy Generation, as the Western islanders who grew up in that period are known, reminisce about barbecues on July 4, free medical care and freedom to do as they pleased.

Eventually, though, the United States gave in to repeated Japanese demands to return the islands to its rule. On June 26, 1968, the Stars and Stripes was taken down and replaced with the Japanese flag.



The American flag is taken down during the ceremony marking the Ogasawara Islands' reversion to the Japanese administration on June 26, 1968. (The Asahi Shimbun/Getty Images)

That same day, the island's school came under the control of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government, and classes switched overnight from being entirely in English to entirely in Japanese.

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Rocky Savory was 8 years old at the time, and young enough to adapt. But the transition was tough for older children and young adults. His older sister became a U.S. citizen, eventually going on to work in the Pentagon and settle in Maryland. His cousin John Washington, then 19, served in the U.S. Army for 28 years, including two tours in Vietnam, and now lives in Spanaway, Wash.

For the islanders, identity and language has shifted from generation to generation, as Japan and the United States have each claimed the community for their own

geostrategic convenience. The eldest and youngest generations are often more comfortable in Japanese, while the Navy Generation often prefers English.

A church on Chichijima built by the U.S. Navy

After WWII, the United States took over the Ogasawara islands but relented in 1968 to Japanese demands that they be handed back. (Simon Denyer/The Washington Post)

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the islands have developed their own Ogasawara dialect, said Daniel Long, a linguistics professor at Tokyo Metropolitan University.

AD

“Are you Japanese or American?” the curious visitor might ask Savory’s descendants today. The responses, in different languages, depend on who is answering — and who is asking, said David Chapman of the University of Queensland in Australia, who has written an authoritative history of the islands.

“It’s a good question, hard to answer,” laughed Rocky Savory. “Let’s say the good answer is islander. I’m an islander.”

Washington, who for years flew an American flag above his guesthouse in Chichijima and still visits the islands every year, says he’s a U.S. citizen, “but deep in my heart, I still consider myself a Bonin Islander.”

Yet for the younger members of the community, the answer changes again.



Rocky Savory stands outside the BITC supermarket he runs on Chichijima on July 15. Savory is a fifth-generation descendant of Nathaniel Savory, one of the first settlers on the islands, who arrived in June 1830. (Simon Denyer/The Washington Post)

“I feel like I am Japanese,” said 32-year-old Nasa Savory, a distant cousin of Rocky, who grew up on the islands before attending high school and university in Tokyo, where he earned a PhD and met his wife, a mainlander. “I don’t feel like I’m an American, but I am an islander.”

AD

In his childhood, Nasa says, children from all communities mingled “with no difference between anyone,” and Long says there has always been surprisingly little ethnic tension on the islands.

“Japan is trying to navigate its way to becoming a multiethnic, multilingual society,” Long said. “Britain and the United States have struggled with that, but here they found a way to do it, 150 years ago.”

Yet there is one small but significant obstacle that Nasa Savory can’t overcome to be completely Japanese in the eyes of his mainland countrymen, who often tend to equate nationality with racial purity. His family name in Japanese is セーボレー (pronounced “Sēborē”) and is spelled in the katakana script reserved for foreign words.

Every time he books a hotel room or a table at a restaurant, the person on the other end of the line does a double take: How is he Japanese with a foreign name? Renting an apartment is even harder, in a country where many landlords openly exclude foreigners. “When I try to rent a home, they tell me to show my passport and explain why I have such a different, American name,” he said. “I don’t feel happy about that. I’m Japanese and I have lived here for 20 years, but they treat me like a non-Japanese.”



Chichijima, part of the Ogasawara Islands. (Kyodo/AP)

[103 Comments](#)



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